

Spectacle and Silence: Vampire Tourism and the Erosion of Folkloric Cadence in Romania and Serbia

Alton ARNOLD¹

This article stands at the boundary between spectacle and silence, tracing how vampire myth erodes differently in Romania and Serbia. In Romania, ancestral beliefs once woven into ritual life have been transformed into global spectacle—Dracula branding, tourism circuits, and algorithm-driven fragments. The myth remains visible but emotionally thinned, present yet disconnected from its cultural memory. In a rural Serbian village, by contrast, the vampir and veštica persist quietly in elders' fading recollections. Their stories are not erased by censorship but by generational drift, a slow cultural erosion. Drawing on trauma theory, cultural memory studies, and ethnography, the article asks what is preserved when myth becomes commodity, and what is lost when it fades without fanfare. It argues that both spectacle and silence diminish folkloric cadence, though Serbia's quiet may signal care rather than absence. The folklorist becomes a witness to fragile memory, tending stories before they disappear.

Keywords: *spectacle, silence, myth, memory, erosion*

1. Introduction

I entered the village seeking vampire lore; I departed carrying stories of mourning.

This study traces the divergent afterlives of vampire folklore in Romania and Serbia, listening to the threshold between spectacle and silence. In Romania, vampire myth is highly visible commodified through tourism, branding, and algorithmic display (Martin 2023, Wondering Escapes 2025). Once braided into ancestral rhythm, it has been rebranded as Dracula: stylized, exported, and consumed through castles, tours, and digital spectacle (Balinisteanu 2016). Myth survives but hollowed—visible yet emotionally estranged.

¹ Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia (USA), altonarnoldPhD@yahoo.com

In contrast, fieldwork in a rural Serbian village reveals a quieter unraveling. Here, the vampir and *veštica* (witch) linger not in brochures or hashtags, but in the fading breath of *starac* (elder) memory. Their stories are not suppressed by regimes but lost to time and the age of their tellers. Serbia's folkloric quiet is not absence, but a form of cultural care a mourning untranslatable into currency.

Across Eastern Europe, folklore is not merely remembered; it is lived, mourned, and sometimes staged. This article draws on trauma theory, cultural memory studies, and reflexive ethnography to ask: What is lost when myth becomes market? What is preserved when it does not? It argues that the folklorist must enter not as collector, but as witness, attuned to cadence, rupture, and the ethics of listening. Between Romania's spectacle and Serbia's silence, this work traces the fragile pulse of memory and the urgency of tending to stories before they vanish.

2. Literature review

I began my research on vampire folklore to deepen my dissertation's inquiry into ritual and memory. What I found was not just myth, but mourning. In Serbia, stories are fading—not censored but forgotten, lost to time and to a youth increasingly detached from ancestral breath. In Romania, the same stories have been transformed into commodity: embellished, stylized, and sold as Dracula. This tension between visibility and loss echoes across existing scholarship, particularly in studies of Romanian vampire lore.

Scholars have extensively examined the transformation of Romanian vampire folklore into global commodity, often through literary, cinematic, and heritage lenses. Balinisteanu (2016) traces the evolution of the *strigoi* into Dracula, highlighting how folkloric bodies are stylized for export and stripped of ritual depth. Martin (2023) notes a shift from ancestral rhythm to algorithmic display, where myth circulates more as spectacle than memory. Popular sources reinforce this trend, celebrating Dracula tourism while flattening myth into marketable fragments (Wondering Escapes 2025). Yet few have addressed the ethical implications of this shift or set it in contrast with neighboring traditions that refuse, or simply never enter, the realm of commodification.

Serbian folklore—particularly mourning-inflected tales of the *vampir* and *veštica*—remains understudied. These figures do not appear in brochures or hashtags, but in the fading breath of *starac* (elder) memory. Their stories are not suppressed by regimes but quietly lost to time and the age of their tellers. This absence in scholarship is not merely a gap; it is a silence that demands listening. My

fieldwork suggests that this quiet is not void, but a form of cultural care: a mourning that resists translation into currency.

To frame this inquiry, I draw on trauma theory (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001), cultural memory studies (Assmann 2011; Hirsch 2008), and reflexive ethnography (Rosaldo 1989; Jackson 2002). These frameworks allow me to approach folklore not as static artifact, but as living wound—transmitted, mourned, and sometimes fractured. They position the folklorist not as collector, but as witness, attuned to cadence, rupture, and the ethics of listening. Between Romania's spectacle and Serbia's silence, this review traces the scholarly terrain and prepares the ground for a methodology rooted in breath, care, and testimony.

3. Framing folkloric cadence

At the heart of this study lies the concept of folkloric cadence, the lived rhythm through which myth, memory, and ritual are transmitted across generations. Cadence is not merely sonic; it is temporal, emotional, and ethical. It marks the breath between words, the ritual pause before a name, the trembling continuity of stories carried in the body and voice. Folkloric cadence binds myth to community, and community to mourning.

In Romania, this cadence is disrupted by spectacle. Vampire lore, once braided into ancestral rhythm, is now stylized and exported—rebranded as Dracula and consumed through tourism, branding, and algorithmic display. The cadence persists, but hollowed: visible, yet emotionally estranged. In Serbia, cadence fades through silence. The vampir and veštica linger in elder breath, not brochures. Their stories are not suppressed but slowly lost to time. Here, cadence stretches thin—fragile, mournful, and untranslatable into currency.

By tracing folkloric cadence, this study listens not only to myth's content, but to its tempo, its rupture, and its fading. It argues that both spectacle and silence erode cadence—one through commodification, the other through generational drift. The folklorist, then, must enter not as collector, but as witness: attuned to the ethics of listening, the urgency of tending, and the mourning that memory demands.

4. Methodology

In my fieldwork in Serbia, specifically in the village of Kjazović, I found stories—not just of vampires and witches, but of history carried in breath. These were not tales offered for spectacle, but fragments of memory shared in kitchens, courtyards, and

quiet pauses. The vampir and veștica emerged not as characters, but as presences woven into mourning rituals, seasonal rhythms, and the fading recollections of elders. What I encountered was not folklore as artifact, but as living wound: whispered, remembered, and sometimes resisted.

My fieldwork in Romania, conducted throughout the Transylvanian region, revealed a different texture of myth. Stories of vampires were told quietly, often with hesitation, like breath afraid of being held in spectacle, or burdened by the stigma that still clings to these figures. Beneath the surface of Dracula tourism, I encountered a lingering discomfort: a sense that ancestral stories had been taken, stylized, and sold. The *strigoi*, once braided into ritual and rural rhythm, now appeared on brochures, souvenirs, and algorithmic feeds. Vampire lore had been morphed into commodity, labeled, packaged, and consumed through tourist adventures of all kinds. Yet behind the spectacle, some voices resisted. They spoke not to entertain, but to remember. Their stories flickered in the margins, wary of being flattened into folklore for sale.

This study draws on trauma-informed ethnography, oral history methodology, and participatory listening. I conducted interviews with elders (*starci*), engaged in informal conversations with villagers, and observed ritual practices tied to death, protection, and seasonal transitions. My approach was not extractive—I entered not as collector, but as witness. I listened for cadence, rupture, and the silences that speak. Transcriptions were rendered with care, preserving pauses, repetitions, and the emotional texture of speech. Where translation was necessary, I chose poetic fidelity over literal equivalence, honoring the rhythm and breath of the original.

In addition to interviews and ritual observation, I spent time researching Vlad Țepeș and visiting sites associated with Dracula tourism, including Bran Castle—marketed as “Dracula’s Castle” despite its tenuous historical link. These spaces, curated for spectacle, offered a stark contrast to the vernacular mourning I later encountered in Serbia. At Bran, myth is staged: vampire-themed merchandise, guided tours, and algorithmic promotion reframe ancestral lore as consumable experience. This encounter with stylized folklore sharpened my methodological stance. It underscored the need to listen not only to what is visible, but to what resists visibility—to attend to cadence, rupture, and the silences that speak.

I also visited Snagov Monastery, often claimed as Vlad Țepeș’s burial site, where myth is curated through spatial ambiguity and legend. Though excavations revealed no human remains, the site continues to attract visitors seeking proximity to Dracula’s legacy. This encounter reinforced the contrast between stylized spectacle and vernacular mourning—between myth staged for consumption and memory carried in breath.

I carried out my fieldwork in Serbia in 2025, in the rural eastern village of Kjazović, where stories surfaced not as spectacle but as breath. I approached each encounter with reverence, guided by trauma theory (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001), cultural memory studies (Assmann 2011; Hirsch 2008), and reflexive ethnography (Rosaldo 1989; Jackson 2002). These frameworks shaped not only how I listened, but how I interpreted what was withheld, mourned, or forgotten.

In one encounter in Serbia, a respected elder and former communist leader in his town, dismissed vampire lore entirely. “We don’t believe in such things,” he said, with a tone that suggested not just skepticism, but ideological conviction. His stance reflected the rationalist ethos of Yugoslav socialist modernity, where folklore was often reframed as superstition incompatible with progress. Yet even in his refusal, I listened for cadence—the pause before “believe,” the tightening of breath when others mentioned mourning rituals. His denial marked a different kind of silence: not folkloric, but political. It reminded me that memory is shaped not only by tradition, but by the regimes that govern belief.

Fieldwork in Romania took place throughout Transylvania during 2023 and 2024. While the terrain was marked by tourism and stylized folklore, I sought out quieter voices, those wary of spectacle yet still tethered to ancestral rhythm. The contrast between these two field sites informs the comparative cadence of this study.

The contrast between these two field sites informs the comparative cadence of this study, a rhythm shaped by mourning, refusal, and the ethics of listening.

5. Lingering Dead, Living Hands: Ethnographic encounters in Bread, Breath, and Shadow

In the Kjazović region of Serbia, an elderly grandmother sat by the stove, hands folded in her lap, the bread cooling beside her. I hadn’t asked about vampires. I had asked about winter. But her answer drifted elsewhere.

“We used to leave bread for the dead,” she said. “Not for ghosts. For the ones who hadn’t finished mourning.”

The room held its breath with her. Her voice moved slowly, shaped by hesitation rather than performance. She did not say *vampir*. She said “the ones who lingered,” a phrase that signaled presence without spectacle. Later she spoke of *veštice*, but not as witches. “They remembered,” she said. Her breath caught before that word. In her framing, the *veštica* was a memory keeper—a woman who carried what others avoided naming, someone whose ritual gestures safeguarded the emotional edges of the village.

Another elder in Kjazović carried the same cadence, but in a different register. Standing in his courtyard, he stared toward the orchard when I asked about night travel.

“We don’t go there after dusk,” he said. “Not because of fear. Because the dead walk slowly.”

He would not use the word *vampir*, nor entertain the stories others whispered. When I pressed, gently, he waved off the need for precision. The orchard itself held the memory; the silence around it was a warning. His daughter later whispered, “He still talks to the ones who used to work the land.” What lingered was not a monster. It was a rhythm—grief, obligation, a sense of unfinished presence that shaped the way one moved through the world.

A third encounter unfolded at a threshold in a village near Kjazovic. A man stood in his doorway as we spoke, one hand resting on the frame as though the wood itself mattered. When I asked about burial customs, he answered with a story of a relative who returned home three nights after his funeral—not to frighten, but to wash his hands and sit for a moment in the place he loved.

“He wasn’t dangerous,” the man said. “Just not finished.”

He tapped the doorframe twice, a gesture so habitual it seemed older than the story. He never used the word *povratnik*, though his description aligned with it. Instead, he spoke of “a man who didn’t know he was gone yet.” The threshold became a kind of moral geography—where the living acknowledged the dead without inviting them in, where memory was managed through quiet, practical care.

Memory took a similar form in Romania.

In the Hațeg region of Transylvania, after an evening of *palincă* and playful folklore—sirens in the rivers, creatures said to roam the hills—I thought my work for the night was done. But then the matriarch, who had been silent, began to speak.

She said the story she carried was not legend, but memory.

As a child, she knew a family whose patriarch died in a logging accident. Days after the burial, his wife awoke to find him sitting calmly at the foot of the bed, as if returning from work.

“I cannot die,” he told her. “There is wood to cut. You’ll need it for winter.”

And so, he worked. For days he gathered firewood, repaired the roof, tended the chores he had always done. But he did not leave. She reminded him of the burial, the rites, the sealed grave. Still, he stayed.

In these villages, where Orthodox prayer mixes with older protections, the people know the signs: a candle that will not die out, a cold lingering in the doorway, garlic braided with intention. The Church may not name the *strigoi*, but the villagers do. And when the dead return, they act.

The wife sought the priest. He brought nails, garlic, holy water, and prayer. After the ritual, the husband did not return. What lingered was not terror, the matriarch said, but care—a man trying to finish what life had asked of him.

When she finished, silence spread through the room. My companion whispered that he had never heard her tell this story before.

These encounters—bread left for the dead, orchards avoided at dusk, a man pausing at a threshold, a husband who worked after death—were never recorded by device. But they remain central to this study's interpretive frame: moments where memory resists erasure through gesture, silence, and the quiet power of ritual. Here, between Serbia's vernacular mourning and Romania's uneasy remembrance, the boundary between worlds is neither spectacle nor myth. It is breath, bread, shadow, and the living hands that tend them.

6. Analysis

In Romania, vampire folklore has not disappeared—it has been rebranded. The *strigoi*, once embedded in rural ritual and ancestral rhythm, now circulates as Dracula: a figure stylized for export, consumed through tourism, merchandise, and digital spectacle. This transformation is not neutral. It reflects a shift from vernacular transmission to algorithmic visibility, where myth is preserved in form but emptied of emotional and ritual depth.

Fieldwork revealed that this commodification is not universally embraced. While castles and tours celebrate Dracula as cultural capital, many interlocutors expressed discomfort—even reluctance—when speaking of vampire lore. Stories were told quietly, often with hesitation, as if burdened by the stigma that still clings to these figures. The marketed myth flattens complexity: it replaces mourning with adventure, ritual with branding. What survives is a spectacle—visible, profitable, but emotionally estranged.

This loss is not merely narrative; it is ethical. When folklore becomes commodity, its cadence shifts. The pauses, silences, and gestures that once carried memory are replaced by curated scripts and promotional language. The *strigoi* no longer warns or mourns—it entertains. In this context, vernacular voices flicker in the margins, resisting flattening through quiet refusal. Their stories are not offered for sale, but for remembrance.

The commodification of vampire folklore is not abstract—it is spatial, embodied, and consumable. Vlad Țepeș's birthplace in Sighișoara now houses a themed restaurant marketed as "Dracula's Restaurant," where ancestral myth is served alongside dinner menus and souvenir mugs. Castles once tied to regional

history are rebranded as Dracula tours, and algorithmic feeds promote vampire-themed adventures curated for global audiences. These sites do not merely stylize myth—they stage it. The strigoi, once braided into rural ritual and communal rhythm, now circulates as Dracula: a figure flattened for export, visible yet emotionally estranged. This transformation reflects a shift from vernacular transmission to curated spectacle, where folklore survives in form but loses its cadence—its breath, its mourning, its refusal to entertain (MacCannell 1976).

In Serbia, the folkloric figures of *vampir* and *veštica* persist not through spectacle, but through vernacular mourning. Unlike the highly commercialized strands of Romanian vampire mythology—those shaped by the tourism industry around Dracula-branded sites and narratives—these Serbian presences are not marketed or curated. They survive in fragments, gestures, and seasonal rituals. The *vampir* is not a tourist attraction but a mnemonic figure tied to unresolved death, improper burial, and communal rupture. Bread left on thresholds, water poured at graves, and hesitations in speech signal a cosmology where the dead may linger—not to haunt, but to mourn what remains unfinished (Eliade 1972; Ispas 1999).

The *veštica*, similarly, is not cast as evil but as a woman who remembers—often feared, sometimes respected, but rarely commodified. Her presence in oral narratives reflects social ambiguity rather than supernatural threat. In interviews, elders spoke of her with caution, not condemnation. She was described as someone who “knew too much,” a phrase that suggests epistemic tension rather than moral deviance. These figures resist flattening not through invisibility, but through ethical withholding—a refusal to render memory into marketable myth.

This vernacular resistance is not romantic nostalgia; it is a form of cultural care. As Assmann (2011) argues, cultural memory depends not only on transmission but on the conditions of its preservation. In Serbia, those conditions are fragile: stories are fading—not censored, but aging with their tellers. Yet the refusal to stylize or sell these figures may itself be a mnemonic act—a way of safeguarding memory through silence, cadence, and ritual.

The contrast between Romania and Serbia reveals not simply two folkloric traditions, but two divergent modes of cultural memory. In Romania, vampire lore has been stylized and exported—transformed into a spectacle that circulates through tourism, merchandise, and digital media. While this visibility ensures survival, it often comes at the cost of emotional and ritual depth. In Serbia, by contrast, the *vampir* and *veštica* persist in quieter forms—embedded in mourning practices, seasonal gestures, and vernacular cadence. These figures are not curated for consumption; they are remembered through breath, silence, and ritual withholding.

This divergence reflects broader tensions between market and memory, visibility and care. Romania's myth survives through branding, Serbia's through refusal. Yet both carry risk: one of distortion, the other of disappearance. The ethical challenge, then, is not only to document what remains, but to listen for what resists being documented—to attend to cadence, rupture, and the silences that speak.

7. Conclusion

This study began with a question: what is lost when myth becomes market, and what is preserved when it does not? Fieldwork in Romania and Serbia reveals two divergent trajectories of vampire folklore—one stylized and exported, the other fading and withheld. Romania's *strigoi*, rebranded as Dracula, survives through visibility but risks emotional estrangement. Serbia's vampir and *veštica* persist in vernacular mourning, resisting commodification through silence, cadence, and refusal.

These trajectories are not merely cultural contrasts; they are ethical conditions. Folklore does not vanish, it transforms. But transformation carries stakes: when ritual becomes spectacle, when breath becomes branding, when memory is flattened into myth. In Romania, the marketed vampire entertains but rarely mourns. In Serbia, the revenant lingers not to haunt, but to remember what was left unfinished.

As scholars, we are tasked not only with documentation, but with listening. This listening must be trauma-informed, cadence-sensitive, and ethically attuned. It must honor what is withheld as much as what is spoken. The archive we build is not neutral—it reflects our stance toward memory, loss, and cultural care.

In the end, folklore survives not only through visibility, but through vernacular resistance. The stories that flicker in kitchens and courtyards, in pauses and gestures, may never appear in brochures or feeds. Yet they carry what spectacle cannot: the breath of mourning, the ethics of remembering, and the quiet refusal to be consumed.

References

- Assmann, Jan. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Balinisteanu, Tudor. 2016. *Violence, Narrative and Myth in Joyce and Yeats: Subjective Identity and Ancestral Memory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. (Note: This text includes analysis of myth and memory in Eastern European contexts)
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29(1): 103–128.
- Ispas, Sabina. 1999. *Mit, Rit și Magie în Cultura Tradițională Românească*. București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române.
- Jackson, Michael. 2002. *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Martin, Radu. 2023. "Dracula and the Algorithm: Folklore in the Age of Spectacle." *Journal of Romanian Cultural Studies* 12(3): 45–62.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wondering Escapes. 2025. "Dracula Tourism in Transylvania: Castles, Legends, and Souvenirs." *Wondering Escapes Travel Blog*. Accessed August 2025. <https://www.wonderingescapes.com/dracula-tourism-transylvania>